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ABSTRACT

Changing conditions in higher education have altered the attitudes of many participants in the academic evaluation process, as well as the process itself. The overall result has been a trade-off between more useful data gathering, more informed discussion by the participants, and some diffusion of the decision-making power on one hand; and a more complicated, formalized, and time-consuming evaluation process on the other hand. Some of the safeguards that are not a visible part of evaluation include written and publicized criteria for retention, promotion, and tenure decisions; a well-defined appeal procedure; and strict reliance on the rules of evidence in reaching personnel decisions. These characteristics of faculty evaluation relate primarily to procedural issues without clearly defining and measuring "performance." One way of including performance criteria in evaluation, while at the same time tailoring each professor's evaluation to the needs of the college and the specific strengths of the faculty member, is through the growth contract. Essential features of this approach are: (1) a conference to fashion an agreement between the faculty member and his/her peers which establishes a few key goals for the coming year as well as specifically defined performance measures; (2) agreement by the department chair to initiate frank and factual discussions if standards are not being met and to provide assistance and encouragement to faculty wishing to participate in development activities; (3) voluntary participation; and (4) peer feedback to alert the faculty member as to the effects of his/her performance. If growth contracts are built on the twin concepts of flexibility and individualization, the community college will grow along with its faculty members. (EJV)

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FACULTY EVALUATION

AT THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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> ". . . the most critical problem confronted in the social organization of any college or university is the proper evaluation of faculty services and giving due recognition through impartial assignment of status."

One might attribute the above statement to a recent observer of the higher education scene. Actually Logan Wilson's Comments were made in 1942 in a work entitled The Academic Man. Yet there is a certain timelessness about his thoughts. Who, for example, would want to argue that the specifics of what is expected of them in a college classroom should be kept from them? But how many instructors working on college campuses today have even a vague awareness of what constitutes exemplary or even satisfactory performance in the classroom?

It is the contention of this author that whatever the substantive answer to the latter question, it must have within it the twin characteristics of flexibility and individualization. Evaluating teaching effectiveness in an environment that proclaims to be the one place in higher education where teaching is more important than publications for advancement (the community college) is not an easy matter. Some would agree that any assessment of a teacher's clarity, effectiveness of presentation, or his or her short-term impact on students might be made through use of a student evaluation instrument. Arguments begin over how and when to measure effectiveness and how to use the evaluation data. Both of these are troublesome issues across the disciplines.

As Joseph Lowman has pointed out:

> Social science faculties are generally most sympathetic to rating-scale questionnaires because this evaluation method is common to their disciplines. Interestingly, rating scales commonly draw fire both from humanities faculty, who feel that they reduce teachers to numbers, and from a natural science faculty, who view the application of measurement theory to people as a bastardization of scientific methodology.[1]

Obviously, parochial concerns of those who feel threatened among the faculty coincide with the administrative "heartburn" over the leveling of enrollments, increased instructional costs and the multiplication of litigation cases. Both faculty and administrators see importance in coping with the issue of faculty evaluation since they more or less participate in managing the faculty reward structure which has grown to become a time-consuming process by the nineteen eighties.

This is not a point to be passed over too quickly. Changing conditions in higher education have changed the attitudes of many participants in the academic evaluation process as well as the process itself. Kenneth Eble calls the overall result a "trade-off". There are some plusses: more useful data-gathering, more informed discussion by the participants, some diffusion of the decision-making power. But on the minus side, he worries over the loss of "some of the ease that goes with more casual procedures carried out by someone we could trust."[2] Both faculty and administrators have the experience to ask today: How much time can we invest in

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1 Joseph Lowman, Mastering the Techniques of Teaching. San Francisco Jossey-Bass, 1984, p. 217

2 Peter Seldin, Changing Practices in Faculty Evaluation, San Francisco. Jossey-Bass, 1984, pp. 98-99.

evaluating faculty without it becoming counter-productive?

There are certain minimum standards of performance that one can quickly agree upon. The somewhat willing presence of court intervention on campus in recent years has also contributed to more formal agreements for due process in faculty evaluation practices. Typical safeguards that are more visible now than in the earlier growth years for community colleges include:

a. written and publicized criteria for retention, promotion, and tenure decisions,

b. a well-defined appeal procedure for dissatisfied faculty,

c. an understanding, accepted by faculty and administration, of the circumstances under which the institution's leaders will overturn peer committee recommendations on retention, promotion and tenure.

d. strict reliance on the rules of evidence in reaching these key personnel decisions

e. a written statement of reasons provided to the faculty member for a negative decision on retention, promotion and tenure.[3]

One cannot deny that these five factors primarily relate to procedural issues. One is still stuck on the flypaper of defining and measuring "performance". As a practical matter, seeking such an algebra of faculty evaluation can be a troublesome adventure. When a new faculty member is brought on board, she or he is usually given a copy of the faculty handbook and/or faculty contract. By so doing, the responsible college authority becomes the dispenser of the factual information on that institu-

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3 Peter Seldin, p. 30

tution's hiring, promotion and tenure practices. The handbook or contract is rare that offers specific [illegible] of teaching, college and community service and publications. Should a brand new faculty member ask for an explanation, the response will depend mainly on who is asking the question. If it is an administrator, the response will most likely be that promotion and tenure are awarded to those who achieve excellence in the specific categories found in the handbook or contract. If one asks a faculty member, she or he will most likely be told teaching is what is most rewarded at this community college. The new instructor, if possessed of both opinions, has a right to wonder who to believe, and, to play it safe, will probably believe both views and plan accordingly.

The impact of recent changes in the workplace have now helped to place some veteran faculty in the same dilemma as was tradionally felt by the untenured new colleague on campus. With student enrollments shifting, some institutions are trying to reassign and retrain tenured faculty who find themselves in a shrinking enrollment situation.. For example, faculty evaluation data may become one way for a dean or department chair to discover at least an interest in business or data processing subjects by underutilized historians. If such is the case, proven faculty members can be retained by being re-trained.

One can see that the scope of the problem of defining and measuring performance has not improved in recent years and has in fact widened to include faculty members both new and old. In view of this increased faculty concern, would it not seem useful to try and make each professor's evaluation tailored to the needs of the college and the specific strengths of that faculty member?

The rationale that each faculty member contributes differently to the needs of a department is not a new one, but the necessity to be specific and systematic about measuring that contribution is a new catalyst. The time to establish goals would seem to be best done after an annual self-evaluation has been completed by the faculty member and student evaluation data has been received from the prior term. An opportunity to consult with one's peers in a frank and unthreatening atmosphere for assistance in establishing a few key goals for that year would seem a sensible next step. The fashioning of an agreement between the faculty member and his peers would be the goal of such a conference and awareness of the need for individualization and flexibility in weighing the criteria for evaluation must be commonly felt.

Four guidelines that might assist in such a conference are:

a. Our agreement should be consonant with the department's and the institution's needs as perceived at the start of the academic year.

b. Our agreement will spell out in specific terms how my performance will be measured during the academic year and by whom.

c. The department chair (or his or her authorized representative if a large department) agrees to take the initiative to have frank, factual and candid discussions with me if it is the perception of the chair that I am not measuring up to the agreed upon standards.

d. The department chair agrees to provide assistance and encouragement to all faculty who wish to participate in faculty development activities that will allow the faculty member to grow in ways mutually acceptable to the individual and the institution.

In using guidelines such as these, one critical assumption is that a faculty member freely chooses to participate in such a growth contract arrangement. Ideally, no one should be forced to use such a system against their will. Those who prefer more traditional methods because they value them and use them constructively should be allowed to continue. Unfortunately, the consequences of completely voluntary participation might be that the college teachers most in need of improvement choose not to take part. In addition, voluntary participation in the use of student evaluation rating forms has produced distorted norms because only the better teachers may be included.[4]

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4 G.S. Howard and J.H. Bray. "Use of Norm Groups to Adjust Student Ratings of Instruction: A Warning." Journal of Educational Psychology, 1979, vol. 71, 58-73.

There is also the question of whether or not such growth contracts are mainly used by the faculty member and the department chair for the purpose of instructional improvements. If so, things could be relatively smooth. If faculty are involved from the beginning in the decision to encourage growth contracts as an experiment and this is all that is done, there is likely to be little objection. Use of such growth contracts might be required of new faculty since the college has a special responsibility to ensure that the performance of new faculty is satisfactory. Here also recently hired members of the staff should be involved as much as possible in deciding their goals for that academic year. Individualization and flexibility will be achieved with improved morale among the junior faculty if the primary emphasis is given in the process to self-improvement. However, it would be difficult to be convincing on this latter point if the department chair admits that he or she has an obligation to share all growth contracts at re-hiring time with the upper levels of the college administration. When little is known about how the college administration weighs such information about faculty, the possibility that data from faculty growth contracts might be misused or ignored is a real one. One solution that has been used in the past with student evaluation material would be to allow the department chair to prepare summaries of what faculty growth contracts contain without getting into the specifics for each faculty member. Self-improvement language rather than hire and fire recommedations

would form the narrative of such summaries. Assuming that the above has been worked out, the issue of feedback follows.

The task of the peer providing feedback is to alert the colleague to what effect her or his performance is having within the particular framework that was mutually established at the start of the semester. Feedback which is specific and concrete is helpful because the faculty member can handle it. That is, she or he can place the information in a time and place context and examine it there. This situation is not nearly as threatening to the teacher as a negative generalization made by you conveying the message of a trend over time which may appear to be irreversible. If you create an atmosphere of sharing, that you wish to offer what you have to the teacher for mutual consideration, then you create a non-threatening situation. If the feedback is shared information, then the teacher is free to use it as she or he sees fit in light of your overall conference comments. Since the purpose of the peer providing feedback is on what the teacher-colleague needs rather than what you need to get off your chest, your first consideration must be the meaningfulness of the feedback to the teacher. If you must get a few things off your chest, perhaps a separate conference or a casual meeting would be better so as to differentiate the feedback session from your tension release session.[5]

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5 Ronald T. Hyman. School Administrators' Handbook of Teacher Supervision and Evaluation Methods. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.. Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1975, pp. 75-78

If the use of growth contracts has a high level of risk, it also possesses the potential of diminishing the vagueness over "satisfactory performance". If the use of growth contracts were built on the twin concepts of flexibility and individualization, one more piece in the puzzle of faculty evaluation might be discovered.

Teachers have traditionally set goals for their students at the start of the term. Growth contracts encourage teachers to set goals for teachers. If made in an atmosphere of mutual respect and sensitivity, such instruments could positively affect instructional motivation and performance.

In the final analysis, as each instructor grows, so grows his/her community college. The converse is probably also painfully self-evident to those inhabiting our classrooms as the "greying of the faculty"continues. The latter phenomena should be enough by itself to look a bit closer at the usefulness of faculty growth contracts. As one worthwhile approach for those community colleges who remain serious about pursuing the relationship between instruction and learning,now may be the right time for such an idea to be tried.

CONCLUSIONS:

1. The willingness of the faculty is essential.
2. The creation of a now-threatening atmosphere by the college administration is essential.
3. Further inquiries and follow-up through a survey to a representative sample of community colleges seems to be the natural next step.

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